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ABSTRACT

Great changes are occurring in the vast and extremely diverse nonmetropolitan regions of the United States as a result of economic and social shifts taking place. These are not the only issues facing state and local education policy and planning communities. Nationwide focus on the school reform and school excellence movement poses another serious constraint on the workings of many rural school districts. This paper provides an overview of the school reform and school excellence movement of the past decade; discusses the major effects of economic, social and educational developments on rural school districts; and presents the principal implications held by the changing context of rural America concerning educational planning and policymaking for rural schools. Core considerations for the discussion of new, comprehensive, integrated, and cohesive policies and programs for rural school improvement efforts include those discussed briefly in the following sections: (1) Different Policy and Program Strategies; (2) Comprehensive State Education Agency Planning; (3) Joint Planning with Other Public Service Providers; (4) Increasing Collaboration Among Educational Systems; (5) Planning a More Effective State School System Structure; (6) Strengthening Financial, Programming, and Staffing Practices; (7) Increasing Research and Development on Rural Education; (8) Emphasis on Capacity Building; and (9) Capitalize on Strengths of Rural Schools. What is required is a new commitment for the development of long-term, comprehensive, integrated, and cohesive strategic policies for addressing the issues confronting rural education. The core considerations can be used for the formulation of such policies. This paper contains 13 references. (ALL)

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IMPLICATIONS OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN RURAL AMERICA FOR RURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Great changes are occurring in the vast and extremely diverse nonmetropolitan regions of this country as a result of economic and social shifts taking place in the nation, and to an increasing degree, the international scene as well. These changes are presently and promise to continue to significantly impact the still huge public rural education enterprise, that depending on how one defines a rural district, represents approximately two-thirds of the public school systems in the nation, enroll from one-fourth to one-third of the public elementary-secondary school age population, and are to be found in large numbers in all states, even the most urbanized. Indeed, I know of no comparable period in history where the simultaneous convergence of economic and social changes have so threatened the prospects of maintaining a viable rural school enterprise in this nation than that which we face today.

The preceding speaker provided an excellent synthesis of the major economic and social changes occurring in rural America (e.g., the competitive disadvantage of the traditional rural economies of agriculture, mining, and energy in the world economy, the industrial restructuring underway, the continued high unemployment patterns, reduced population growth, the changing demographics, the continuance of the rural personal income lag, the persistence of poverty, the persistence of underdeveloped rural human resources, the continuing financial crises in agriculture, the growing fiscal pressures on rural local governments, changes in the federal role in the federal systems, a weakened political base, changes in family patterns, and the lessening of differences in rural and urban social values). To suggest that the mosaic he provided is a sobering one might well stand as the understatement of the year.

But these economic and social changes, as critical as they most assuredly are, are not the only difficulties facing state and local policy and planning communities as they strive to maintain a strong state system of elementary-secondary education, that in many cases, I stress again, consists of a large number, if not a strong majority, of rural systems. Compounding their task is the unprecedented focus of recent years on the popularly labeled school reform, or if one prefers, the school excellence movement. The debates about the relative merits of the direction of the school reform/school excellence movement as it is unfolding across this country notwithstanding, the fact is that in numerous ways the movement potentially poses still another

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[1] Much of this material has been drawn from a forthcoming monograph by the author: The Changing Context of Education in a Rural Setting, Occasional Paper 26, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Charleston, WV (expected publication date, December, 1988).

serious constraint on the workings of many rural school districts.

The objectives for my part of the program are three in number. First, I want to provide (still another) overview of the school reform/school excellence movement that has swept the nation for much of this decade. This will be followed by a discussion of what appear to me to be the major effects of all three developments -- economic, social, and educational -- on rural school districts. Third, suggest what I regard to be a number of the principal implications that the changing context of rural America holds for state and local policy and planning communities concerned about rural school systems, that, in many cases, continue to be an integral, if not dominant, part of the state system of elementary-secondary education.

MAJOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The big story in education in the decade of the 1980s is unquestionably the unparalleled school reform/school excellence movement that is national in scope and led by a new alliance between state government, business, and education that was fueled initially by the twin themes of educational excellence and state economic development and more recently by a third objective, the restoration of America's international competitiveness (National Conference of State Legislatures, 1988).

The school reform/school excellence movement is generally credited to have begun with the issuance of the United States Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education report A Nation At Risk in 1983, even though it is clear that a number of states were deeply engaged in improvement efforts in the late 1970s and early part of this decade. The movement is a tidal wave, not to be confused with the numerous ripples that regularly occur in this profession. It is without question unprecedented in American history. And, as might be expected, the movement is not without its critics. These criticisms notwithstanding, the fact is that the reform movement as it has developed in state after state all across this nation has changed education in fundamental ways. It is one of those rare watersheds that occur from time to time in history that will shape the direction that education will follow for years to come.

There have been a number of efforts made in recent years to track the movement. Especially useful are the early profiles developed by Patricia Pine (1985), who summarized state action taken approximately one year after the issuance of A Nation At Risk, and the effort of Anne Bridgman (1985), who summarized state legislative or state executive branch action two years out from the issuance of A Nation At Risk. More recently, the first two annual reports of the National Governors' Association (Time

for Results, the Governors' 1991 Report on Education, 1986) provide excellent profiles of the scope of state reform initiatives.

As these efforts to track the direction of the popularly labeled "first round" of reform have established, an incredibly diverse number of initiatives have been put in place. My own sense of what has happened suggests that it is useful to describe the movement as being driven by a number of major strategies, each having its own tactics. What appear to me to be the seven major strategies of state legislative or state executive intent are shown in Table 1, along with the most common expressions of intent of each.

While I'm certain that this preliminary assessment of what has actually transpired in the relatively hectic and fast-moving pace of the reform movement in its first years will benefit from a longer view, I nonetheless believe that this profile captures the essence of the movement. This is especially so concerning the seven themes of the movement.

EFFECTS OF THE RECENT ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS ON RURAL DISTRICTS

The second objective of this paper is to consider possible effects of the significant economic, social, and educational developments on the nation's rural school districts. In a word, the forces impacting the nonmetropolitan regions of the country promise to reshape rural America, and, it follows, rural schools, perhaps in irreversible ways. A few illustrations, some of them of necessity speculative at this point, are offered in support of this assertion.

Effects of the Economic and Social Trends

The effects of the economic and social trends on rural America outlined by the preceding presenter are potentially enormous, and it should be of little comfort that many are not just peculiar to nonmetropolitan regions but are affecting metropolitan areas as well, as Mr. Reid correctly established. Moreover, not all of the trends are affecting all rural, nonmetropolitan areas of the nation in the same manner but have differing consequences for the various regions of nonmetropolitan America. Keeping these two important considerations in mind, what can be said about the effects of the changing environment and social context of rural America that is of particular significance for those concerned about rural school improvement? It seems to me that the following represent some of the most important considerations.

TABLE 1

INTENDED FOCUS OF STATE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES, 1983-1987

Intended Focus of Initiative	Common Expressions of Intent
1. Improve the quality of instructional program	Increased graduation requirements; required student achievement testing; required programs for 4-year-olds; longer school day/year; increase retention rates
2. Improve the competencies and skills of teachers	More stringent certification requirements; mandated staff development
3. Improve the quality of the teaching profession	More selective entrance and more rigid program requirements for preparation programs; increased minimum salaries; enactment of a form of "career ladder" program
4. Improve the quality of educational leadership	More rigid certification requirements for principals; mandated staff development; required principal at each site
5. Improve monitoring of quality of school systems	Increased accreditation standards; enactment of form of state receivership for marginal or poorly performing systems
6. Improve competition in public education	Enactment of a form of family choice option
7. Improve structure of state school system	Forced school district reorganization

- It seems clear that much of the traditional nonmetropolitan counties of agriculture and energy production (oil, gas, coal, and lumber) are at a competitive disadvantage in world trade in recent years because of a strengthened U.S. dollar, lower foreign production costs in labor-intensive manufacturing, and increased international energy supplies (Henry, Drabenstott, and Gibson, 1986) and that these conditions, that may or may not be cyclical, are the cause of great economic stress in much of the traditional nonmetropolitan regions of the nation.

- It seems equally clear that rural regions will continue to be at a decided disadvantage as a result of the fundamental shift from goods producing to service producing industries and that this basic change in the national and world economic structure will also contribute to economic stress in many nonmetropolitan regions of the nation.

- It seems a certainty that the less promising economic situation in many rural regions will not only contribute to high unemployment rates in rural areas, as they presently are, but will also accelerate the out-migration of population from these regions and that these twin developments, and the consequences that follow, such as poverty, will place added burdens and stretch the capabilities of rural local governments to provide a number of basic public services.

- It seems unmistakable that the continuing fiscal crisis in agriculture and the economic stress in the energy industries will complicate the ability of rural governments to provide basic public services that are important for both economic development efforts and for the quality of life of people who reside in rural communities as well.

- It seems obvious that the economic difficulties in states with large rural regions and the multi-faceted problems these create will complicate the planning and implementation of the one development that might well partially reverse the economic plight of rural regions -- the development of ambitious programs to improve the human resources base in rural regions.

- And, finally, but of equal importance, it seems clear that the out-migration of population from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan regions will further erode the political strength of rural America at the very time when a strong, unified expression of rural interests is most needed in state and national debates.

Effects of
Educational Developments

The depressing changes in the economic and social context of rural America are not the only threats to the nation's rural school systems. Many of the initiatives of the previously outlined first round of school reform have also apparently impacted negatively on districts of this type by either exacerbating several of the historical problems faced by rural systems (e.g., lack of breadth and depth in the instructional program, inadequate enrollment size, difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff, inadequate financial resources) or by adding new pressures. The staggered start of many of the reforms enacted since 1983 explains in part why the ultimate effects of the initiatives on rural systems are still largely speculative.

However, the results of the one recently completed multi-state assessment of the effects of the reform movement on rural districts that I am aware of confirm the early hypotheses of several observers that the problems of rural districts have generally been compounded by the reform movement. The multi-state study was completed by the State Research Associates (1988) for the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and covered the thirteen member states of ARC, including the four states represented at this audience. Major observations made in the report include:

- Many of the reforms reportedly placed extensive burdens on the typically small administrative staffs of rural districts (thus confirming the 1985 prediction of Augenblick and Nachtigal) (pp. 43-46).

- Many rural districts reportedly experienced great difficulty in adding depth and breadth to their instructional programs in response to new mandated graduation requirements, mandatory class size reductions, or mandates for remediation, programs for the gifted, and additional programs for the handicapped (pp. 47-57).

- Many rural schools experienced substantial improvements in student test scores (pp. 57-59).

- Many of the mandates created additional fiscal pressures on rural schools despite increases in state aid in all of the thirteen ARC states (pp. 63-66).

- Most state and local officials believe that public support for education has increased in rural areas as a result of the renewed attention given education in recent years (pp. 66-67).

The State Research Associates study has provided a useful beginning for providing answers to the vexing question of how effective the reform movement has been in achieving the overriding policy objective of improving the quality of schooling. But it did not attempt to address a number of other dimensions of good public policy enactment, such as the external impact or the secondary effects of public policy.

My own views about a number of the possible external impacts of the main lines of the first round of reform are presented in Table 2. This exercise, completed in 1987, is a form of forecasting that is essentially an intuitive method and thus suffers from well-recognized limitations of efforts of this type (e.g., the heavy reliance on subjective judgment, argument from insight, analysis from a basis that is itself arguable). Nonetheless, the approach does allow one to offer conjectures about the future state of phenomena. I share the position of Dunn (1981) "that in the absence of empirical data intuitive forecasting techniques that produce conjectures are particularly useful and even necessary" (p. 195). If my conjectures are correct, even just a few of them, the effects of many of the reform initiatives, including those where there might be a consensus that they have substantial merit, are having a negative effect on many rural systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL POLICY COMMUNITIES

So what does all this mean? What are the implications of this rather bleak picture of rural America that I have portrayed here today? It is clear that the convergence of economic, social, political, and educational developments present the policy and school improvement communities with an unprecedented set of problems that will compound efforts to design and implement meaningful long-term strategies for the improvement of the rural education component of the state system of elementary-secondary education.

But as intractable as many of these issues appear to be, it is also clear that solutions must be sought, that a policy response must be forthcoming. The presence of still large numbers of residents who by choice or necessity continue to live in nonmetropolitan regions, the continued existence of a significant educational enterprise in the rural regions of most states, and the deeply held American commitment to equality for all of our citizens requires no less. Moreover, there should be little doubt that how well the policy and school improvement communities respond to the unfolding perplexities of the issues facing rural districts is of consequence not only for rural areas, but equally so for the future economic, social, and well-being of the entire nation.

TABLE 2

INTENDED FOCUS OF STATE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES AND HYPOTHESIZED MAJOR EFFECTS FOR RURAL SMALL DISTRICTS, 1983-1987

Intended Focus of Initiative	Common Expressions of Intent	Hypothesized Effects
1. Improve the quality of instructional program	Increased graduation requirements; required student achievement testing; required programs for 4-year-olds; longer school day/year; increase retention rates	Most have additional resource and staffing implications
2. Improve the competencies and skills of teachers	More stringent certification requirements; mandated staff development	More staff required because of less flexibility; more monies required for staff development
3. Improve the quality of the teaching profession	More selective entrance and more rigid program requirements for preparation programs; increased minimum salaries; enactment of a form of "career ladder" program	Most have additional resource implications; changes in preparation programs could cause shortages, at least in the short run
4. Improve the quality of educational leadership	More rigid certification requirements for principals; mandated staff development; required principals at each site	Requirement of a principal at each site will require additional resources where this is not the current practice
5. Improve monitoring of quality of school systems	Increased accreditation standards; enactment of form of state receivership for marginal or poorly performing systems	Increase in standards will have resource, program, and staffing implications for districts not in compliance; threat of receivership will cause disruptions and stress in school and community
6. Improve competition in public education	Enactment of a form of family choice option	Losing districts will be further removed from critical mass of students and resources to efficiently and effectively offer needed programs
7. Improve structure of state school system	Forced school district reorganization	Threat of reorganization will cause disruptions and stress in school and community and hinder planning

Source:
Stephens, E.R. (1987). "The rural small school district superintendent: A position at risk." Planning and Changing, 18:3, 189.

THINKING ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS

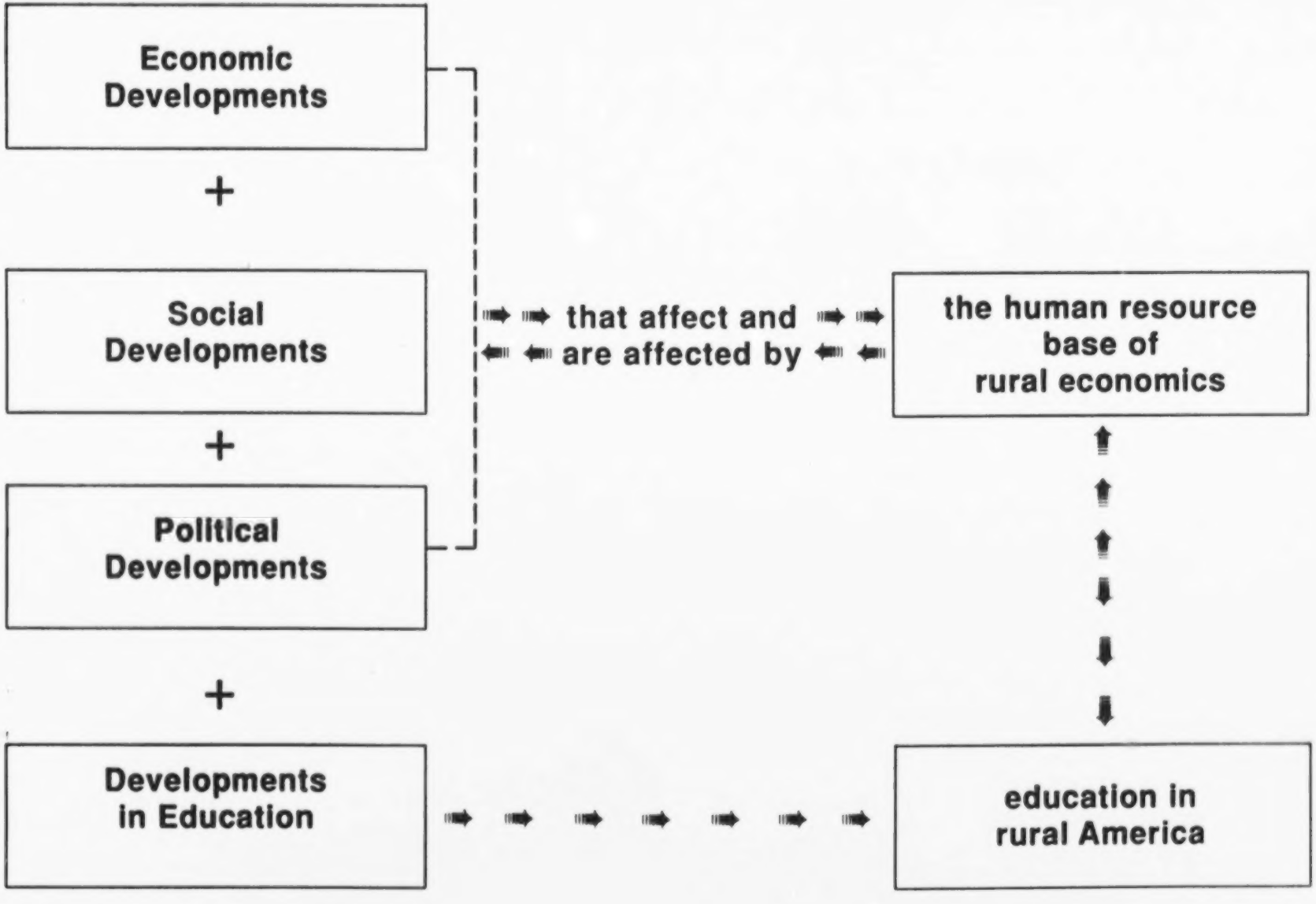

Figure 1

To facilitate what must ultimately be a largely state-specific discussion of implications, a number of core considerations are offered here that are viewed to have widespread utility as a framework for the discussion of needed new, comprehensive, integrated, and cohesive policies and programs for rural school improvement efforts in this era of transition and contraction in rural America that may extend well into the future. The core considerations are nine in number.

Different Policy and Program Strategies

Public policy for rural schools must acknowledge that being rural does not mean being homogenized. Moreover, policy must also reflect the powerful arguments advanced by Nachtigal (1982), Sher (1977), and Tyack (1974) that the continued use of the "one best way" mentality (the urban school model!) in the shaping of state and federal policies for school improvement is detrimental to the success of rural schools because it ignores important peculiarities of systems of this type.

The policy implications of the pronounced differences in rural school systems and the communities of which they are inevitably linked seems axiomatic. That is, rural school improvement initiatives must be diverse and must reflect the different values and socioeconomic characteristics of the rural communities they serve.

Comprehensive State Education Agency Planning

The unfolding socioeconomic changes in rural America that promise to change the context of education in a rural setting places a premium on strategic planning by not only local officials, but especially state offices as well. The prime responsibility for the development of strategic plans for the state system of elementary-secondary education rests, of course, with the state education agency that has the primary responsibility to implement the universally acknowledged constitutional requirement for the provision of a system of public schooling for the elementary-secondary school-age population. The precarious situation faced by many rural schools adds urgency to not only the development of strategic plans for the state system, but the tailoring of much of the planning to give special attention to the rural school sector of the state system of schools. This emphasis makes good planning sense not only for humanitarian reasons, as important as they are, but pragmatic ones as well. That is, the success of many state-initiated school improvement efforts will be largely dependent on an awareness and accommodation of the strengths and weaknesses of the rural school component of the state school

system. Only good, solid, and continuous strategic planning can provide this requisite information.

One useful way to tailor the conventional features of strategic planning exercises to reflect the rural school sector is to incorporate a specific "rural school impact" statement much like the growing use of "fiscal impact" and "environmental impact" statements now in many local, state, and federal legislations. This would help assure that the special problems of rural schools are considered.

Joint Planning with Other Public Service Providers

The population trends and the financial stress being experienced in many rural regions, especially in the traditional nonmetropolitan counties of agriculture, mining, and energy production, suggest that the policy communities will be further handicapped in efforts to bridge the traditional gap in rural public services. Moreover, the changing demographics and behavioral patterns of the elementary-secondary school-age population (e.g., children living in poverty, teenage childbearing, school dropouts, crime, drug abuse, suicide, and other problem behaviors of adolescents), while probably not as consequential in rural areas as in metropolitan regions, at least for the present, are nonetheless significant enough to place added burdens on many already hard-pressed rural, local governments.

The implication of these developments seems clear; a need exists for closer linkages between school district governments and general governments at the local and state levels. In rural communities, the merits of the complete integration of many health, welfare, and education services should also be explored. The merits of closer cooperation between education and other public service providers is not a new idea. However, to the traditional arguments of greater fiscal accountability, revenue enhancement, expenditure reduction, and improved horizontal and vertical planning and communication should be added another compelling rationale. That is, the future welfare of this society is dependent on how well the public school, including the still large number of rural systems, serves the increasingly divergent population of children and youth who will be in attendance. The public schools' success in this effort will, to a great extent, be determined by their ability to circumvent this issue by forging new alliances with other providers of services to children and youth.

The ability of the schools, when acting alone, to respond to the changing conditions over which they have little or no control is greatly limited. A much broader policy response that would

consider all of the conditions of children and youth, as well as the relationship these conditions have on schooling, is required.

Increasing Collaboration Among Educational Systems

The recent loss of population and the financial difficulties of many rural regions will also complicate efforts to close the education and training gap that currently exists in much of rural America. As suggested earlier, these developments are especially troubling because they come at a time when the need for diversification of many rural economies is so urgent.

The policy implications of these developments are unmistakable. Ways must be found to begin to concentrate and target the limited resources (e.g., students, finances, personnel, and facilities) of individual rural systems so that the necessary critical mass of these prerequisites of high quality education and training can be realized. Short of mandating the reorganization of rural school systems into larger administrative units, a policy implication to be discussed subsequently, the next most obvious alternative is to promote increasing collaboration among rural systems and between rural schools and postsecondary institutions.

Planning a More Effective State School System Structure

There can be little doubt that the consequences of the long-term population losses and financial stress in many of the traditional nonmetropolitan agricultural areas of the midwestern states, most of them with large numbers of small enrollment size rural systems, have changed the context of the state's consideration of school district reorganization as a policy option for improving the structure of the state system of schools. Similarly, other states whose large nonmetropolitan regions are currently suffering economic difficulties need to continually assess whether or not the current downturns are cyclical or more fundamental in nature. State and local decisionmakers face a number of vexing issues here. It seems clear that not all rural systems will win and that there will be some losers in this period of transition and contraction.

Thus far, the focus in this discussion has been on the need to rethink the consequences of a weakening rural school component of the state system of elementary-secondary education. But there are other aspects of the structure of the system in need of re-examination as well. It is clear that the economic difficulties of nonmetropolitan regions not only have consequences for local jurisdictions (e.g., rural school systems, and rural, local governments), but state agencies as well. Thus, another policy implication is that state education agencies take the lead in an

assessment of how best to provide needed delivery systems for educational services in the state system. It is assumed that an assessment of this type would include an examination of the quality and quantity of existing delivery modes, many of which appear to have proliferated in the past or make little economic sense today given the new realities of rural America. Moreover, it is further assumed that the state education agency would engage other state agencies having responsibilities for the provision of services to children and youth in this assessment, as called for elsewhere in this discussion. One of the criteria that should be weighted heavily in both of these aspects of the assessment ought to be how best to concentrate and target limited resources to assist rural systems and rural communities in the provision of needed services for children and youth.

Strengthening Financial, Programming, and Staffing Practices

It is axiomatic that a number of the traditional difficulties of many rural school systems will be exacerbated by the economic, social, political, and, it would seem, many educational developments, that are impacting rural America.

A number of the other policy implications discussed here are directed in part at these concerns and should result in the consideration of ways to enrich the financial, programming, and staffing practices of rural schools (e.g., the call for comprehensive state education agency planning and the related need for joint planning with other public service providers). One of the overriding goals of each of these themes is the creation of a critical mass of requisite resources (e.g., students, finances, personnel, and facilities) for high quality programming in rural regions.

One of the implications of the new realities facing rural systems is that the policy communities in states that have not heretofore done so need to examine the ways that other states have attempted to achieve this overriding goal. For example, a number of states have addressed the financial difficulties of rural systems through the use of: "over-burden" factors in state aid allocation schemes that acknowledge higher per-pupil costs related to small size, geographic location, or other extenuating conditions beyond the reasonable control of a rural district; the development of more meaningful measures of school district wealth and effort, and the relationship between these factors in the design of state aid formulas; and a greater commitment to follow any new state mandates with corresponding resources needed by the district to implement new requirements.

Some states have attempted to expand and enrich the instructional and management support systems of rural districts by promoting the establishment of new delivery systems, such as:

various types of educational service agencies to provide services to a cluster of rural systems in the areas of exceptional children, curriculum consultant services, media services, and the full range of management support services; the creation of regional secondary vocational/technical schools to serve clusters of rural systems or by the shifting of many advanced programs in this area to a regional community college; and the use of telecommunications to provide advanced instructional programs to rural schools.

The chronic problems of staffing rural systems have been addressed by some states that have encouraged colleges and universities to provide specialized training for rural teachers in their teacher preparation programs, interdistrict sharing of highly specialized staff, and the greater use of joint appointments with content specialists on the faculty of postsecondary institutions.

Increasing Research and Development on Rural Education

The existing meager and largely nonadditive research literature on rural education has been commented on by many, most recently by Alan DeYoung (1987) in his excellent synthesis of the status of rural education research. As unacceptable as the current situation is, it becomes even more so in light of the changing context of education in a rural setting outlined here today. The absence of a comprehensive research literature to inform the policy and school improvement communities will hamper the planning process in a number of important ways, most noticeably by possibly contributing to the deadliest of all policy errors, defining a problem incorrectly.

The policy implications are also clear here. That is, how can a mechanism be put into place that would not only serve to help identify the substantive areas of research needed by the policy and school improvement communities, but also provide both the legitimacy and resources to carry out the policy agenda once identified? Such an undertaking is probably not reasonable, or even necessary, on an individual state basis and might best be implemented on a regional multistate basis.

Emphasis on Capacity Building

Expanding the capacity of rural school district officials so that they can better define the problems they will face and can engage in other necessary steps in arriving at solutions also seems axiomatic.

However, the implications of the strategy to go with a plan that places responsibility on the individuals closest to the

problem, and the ones who have the greatest stake in the resolution of the problem, raise a number of policy considerations. For example, who among the typically large number of technical assistance providers found in most areas should have primary responsibility for the provision of needed long-term training? What agencies play a secondary role? What criteria should be used in making these judgments? How can the financing of the training be done so that a definite source of fiscal support is available?

Capitalize on Strengths of Rural Schools

This final implication might well be the most important of all. Many observers of rural education consistently cite a number of strengths that good rural systems regularly exhibit: small class sizes that facilitate individualized attention, low dropout rates, a safe orderly environment, development of student leadership qualities, strong faculty identity and commitment to the school, strong parental interest and involvement, and strong community support. In a discussion of the rapidity of changes impacting this society, Hobbs (1983) suggests four particular strengths of rural districts that might cause them to "become the educational trendsetters of the 1990s" (p. 25). The peculiar strengths that Hobbs sees in rural systems that together increase their capacity to adopt to change include: their history of seeking solutions to problems caused by scarce resources, their small size that facilitates flexibility, their diversity that facilitates experimentation with different options, and their close working relations with their communities that promotes collaboration with minimal bureaucratic red tape (pp. 1-2).

It is important to note that many of the strengths of rural systems are strikingly similar to a number of the characteristics of effective schools identified in recent years that have also served as, however roughly, the policy goals for much of the "first round" of reform and that are proposed as the centerpieces of the next generation of reform.

The implication for the policy communities of these similarities of strengths in rural systems and the research literature on effective schools is both clear and sobering. That is, how can policies be designed that will retain those features of good rural districts while simultaneously accommodating the inevitable adjustments that must be made in the rural school district component of the state system of education caused by the new realities of education in a rural setting? The reconciliation of these two competing needs will challenge the creativity of the policy communities as few other policy quandaries have in recent years.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This nation has been served well in the past by a strong, healthy system of rural school districts. However, it should be abundantly clear that the quality of many rural schools will suffer in the future as the results of the unprecedented conflux of both new and old pressures impacting the nonmetropolitan regions of the country become clearer.

These pressures will strain the creativity of local and state policy communities. What is required is a new commitment for the development of long-term, comprehensive, integrated, and cohesive strategic policies for addressing the issues confronting rural systems, and, by extension, the state system of elementary-secondary education. The specific tactics of such a policy must, of course, vary. However, it is hoped that the core considerations of a meaningful policy response outlined here will serve as a useful beginning point for the formulation of such a plan.

While it may not be midnight in rural education as some observers have suggested, the issues facing rural schools appear to be so pervasive that the response of still others who hold the view that somehow with luck and pluck rural schools will make do through this period of transition is equally disconcerting. Neither position is warranted. Rather, what is required is a commitment to understand the new realities of education in a rural setting and a heavy dose of leadership and vision in the shaping of public policies that will serve well into the future.

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